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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning can assist a rural school district to determine its future, rather than allowing others to determine it. Strategic planning is a discipline and a process that produces a results-based, action-oriented plan for the next 3-5 years. Organizations either ascend or decline, and strategic planning can help an organization create a new growth pattern through the process of visioning the future. This is particularly important for school systems, where change can be very difficult. There are a variety of models for strategic planning. The Cambridge educational process and product model includes the following steps: (1) communicate about the need for planning; (2) collect important organizational data before planning; (3) select a planning team of 25 people; (4) develop components of the strategic plan at the first planning session; (5) communicate the proposed plan to stakeholder groups; (6) develop action plans to implement each component or strategy; (7) conduct a second planning session to consider each action plan; (8) summarize the final plan; (9) have the board of education approve the plan; (10) implement the plan; and (11) update annually. Plan components include belief statements, mission statement, parameters, internal analysis, external analysis, organizational competition, critical issues, objectives, strategies, and action plans. All stakeholder groups must be represented on the planning team, which must develop the strategic plan by consensus. (SV)

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STRATEGIC PLANNING: IT'S ESSENTIAL FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

IF YOU FAIL TO PLAN, YOU PLAN TO FAIL

If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. While you may have seen advertisements on television touting the advantage of financial planning and insurance, this statement has a strong educational planning message for all schools. This statement has significant ramifications for rural schools. Rural schools and others need to be involved in a strategic planning process.

The value of the above statement was aptly demonstrated to me at the 1992 REA national convention. Many participants at the National Congress on Rural Education in Traverse City, Michigan on October 11, 1992, talked about what was happening to rural schools. Most felt they had little control over their future. Most felt others, like legislatures, lack of funds, lack of control, and lack of rural voice, were creating their problems. The solutions offered by Congress members also seemed to reflect a lack of control over their own destiny. Seldom during the Congress and individual presentations was the need and value of strategic planning mentioned as a way to help control their own destiny.

Strategic planning can greatly assist a rural district in determining its future, as opposed to having others determine it for them. Schools need to approach strategic planning as an opportunity to determine its future. How a school approaches the issue, as an opportunity or threat, is a choice they make. Whether any issue is a threat or opportunity is your choice; it is all how you perceive it. To me, strategic planning is a tremendous opportunity.

Strategic planning is a discipline and a process which produces a results-based, action-oriented plan for the next three to five years. It is a process that can be used by any rural district. The plan, with annual revisions, will allow the district to meet challenging needs and requirements it faces. It also helps to determine the district's market niche for the future.

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There are three distinct kinds of planning. Operational planning deals with the shorter term (less than a year) and is about maintaining programs, deals with parts and is driven by budgets. It is planning for day-to-day activities.

Long-range planning uses past history for future direction and is often based on facts and figures. We can make inferences about the future based on past history. We frequently use it to make predictions using numbers.

Strategic planning is based on longer-term, such as three to five years. It concerns change and growth to create the future you want for your organization. It is driven by a vision of what can be as opposed to what is. It typically deals with the whole system.

There are a variety of models or processes for strategic planning. Some of them include: a system developed by Kaufman and Herman on planning and restructuring for education; Wheelen and Hunger"s corporate model; Obrien's higher education model; Kansas State's bureaucratic model; Awkerman's ends planning model, and the Cambridge educational process and product. This paper will focus on the Cambridge process as advocated by Bill Cook. Other models or processes may be used; however, the Cambridge process is an excellent one and can produce excellent results.

Peter Drucker has stated, "Strategic planning does not deal with future decisions, but with the future of present decisions." Strategic planning, as was stated above, focuses on the future. We have two ways of focusing on the future. One way is to consider the past and the present and that will dictate what our future will be. A much better way is to consider the past plus what we want our future to be and that will determine what we have to do in the present to get there. Perhaps the best description of this process is financial planning. What we have saved in the past and what we want for our future retirement will dictate what we have to do now to get there. In this process we dictate our future rather than having it dictated to us.

Strategic planning also concerns the life cycle of an organization. Any organization is either ascending or declining. No organization can continuously function at a level plan; it is either growing or declining. Strategic planning will assist an organization to create a new growth pattern through the process of visioning the future.

This is not easy for a school because change is very difficult. It is hard for school systems to look at things differently or to change what they are doing. So often we become paralyzed by our paradigms (the way we perceive what we are). We keep perceiving or seeing ourselves as we have been rather than a change to what we can be. Paradigms determine our frame of reference. For example, is the glass of water half full or half empty. How we see it makes all the difference in the world to us.

Paradigms are the way we see our world. It is the set of rules or boundaries or pattern of our life. Today in education, we have to break our old paradigms and see ourselves in new ways. Strategic planning can help to break some of the old paradigms.

Strategic planning, then, is about the future and the organization's ability to lead itself into a new and better system. Through the process, we work for excellence and help define the market niche for the organization. It helps establish the vision for the organization of what we can be. It brings in a new reality.

The Cambridge process is an excellent one for schools. Through the process, a product is developed which defines the vision and reality of what the school system can be. The Cambridge process includes these steps:

1. Communicate about the need for planning
2. Collect important data about the organization prior to planning
3. Select the strategic planning team of 25 people
4. Conduct the first planning session which develops the planning components (to be listed later)
5. Communicate to stakeholder groups the draft of the strategic plan
6. Select action planning teams to develop action plans to implement each identified strategy
7. Conduct the second planning session to consider each action plan
8. Prepare a summary of the final plan
9. Have the Board consider and approve the plan
10. Implement the plan
11. Annually update the plan (this is very important as different conditions and situations arise that require consideration through the strategic planning process)

The product of the strategic planning process is called the strategic plan. It is the document that specifically defines the course for the organization. There are ten components to the plan using the Cambridge process. They are:

1. **Belief statements** - These are the fundamental convictions, our values and character.
2. **Mission statement** - The mission defines what we will do and how we will do it. It becomes the "North star" for the organization.
3. **Parameters** - They establish the boundaries in which an organization will work. They define those areas in which the organization is not involved.
4. **Internal analysis** - Internal strengths and weaknesses of the organization are identified. The organizational structure is also examined. They are a thorough, unbiased examination of the organization.
5. **External analysis** - These are external factors which may impact the organization. This is done for surprise prevention in six different catagories. This really concerns the future of the organization.
6. **Competition** - Competitors to the organization are identified comparing their and your organization's advantages.
7. **Critical issues** - The main threats to and opportunities for the organization are identified.
8. **Objectives** - These are the expression of the desired, measurable end results for the organization. They are focal points which will help define the market niche.
9. **Strategies** - They are broadly stated means to deploy the resources to achieve the organization's objectives. Strategies should cover the objectives and critical issues previously identified. They also focus back to the mission statement.
10. **Action plans** - They are a specific description and steps necessary to achieve specific results necessary for the implementation of each strategy. These plans are considered by the planning team at the second planning session.

Two other factors need to be discussed pertaining to strategic planning. They are (1) stakeholder representation and (2) concensus.

All stakeholder groups in the organization need to be represented on the strategic planning team. A stakeholder is one, either an individual or group, affected by the plan. It also includes the different "levels" of the organization. Having all groups represented gives more validity to the plan. All stakeholder groups are needed to shape the future of the organization and their interests have to be considered.

The strategic plan is developed through consensus. Consensus means that all team members contribute and everyone's opinions are used and encouraged. Everyone has a chance to express their feelings about an issue. All members share in the final decision although the decision might not be everyone's first choice.

Today, in education and business, there has been much support for the concepts identified as "Total Quality" or "Quality Management." Strategic planning fits nicely into the quality concepts. Perhaps the best definition of quality I have seen is one given by W. Edwards Deming. He stated, "Quality is meeting and exceeding the customer's needs and expectations and then continuing to improve." Total Quality concepts which are advocated by Deming and others include: (1) Viewing the organization as a total system as opposed to viewing it by parts of a system (strategic planning looks at the total system); (2) Focusing on continuous improvement (strategic planning views a system as either improving or declining and the planning maintains the focus on improvement); (3) Remembering that quality is made in the boardroom (strategic planning must involve the commitment of the board and administration for it to be effective); (4) Defining the purpose (strategic planning through the mission identifies what the organization does and how it does it through the mission); (5) Work with the customer (strategic planning involves all stakeholder groups).

Susan Leddick has identified certain foundation principles for an organization focusing on total quality. These principles are (1) customer principle, (2) system principle, (3) variability principle which means there is variation in about all we do, (4) knowledge principle specifically encompassing the plan, do, study, and act cycle for change and improvement, (5) planned change principle, and (6) people principle. All six of these principles are part of the strategic planning process. For example, action teams focus on the plan, do, study, act cycle in formulating and implementing action plans. Planned change comes from the strategic planning process. The whole strategic planning process actively involves many people.

This paper has focused on the importance of strategic planning for rural schools. Through the planning and implementation process, rural schools can determine their market niche and have control over their own destiny. Strategic planning is about the future and emphasizes excellence in education. It is about transforming schools to meet the needs of the rural students. Through the process, you may clean out some barnacles of incrusted habit (a fancy way of saying to quit doing some of the things we do because we always have done them). It can provide more focus to rural education. Strategic planning is essential because the future of education and our rural students is so important. Rural districts must plan for their future.

Education is perceived as being in a crisis. All of us have heard many policymakers and others state that education must change and focus on transformation to meet the needs of the students for the next century.

I have been told that the Chinese have two symbols which stand for the term "crisis." One of the symbols stands for "dangerous" and the second stands for "opportunity." One definition of opportunity is that it is a blessing of time and circumstances. Strategic planning for a rural school can be that blessing of time and circumstances.